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Humphries, Porter, Matthews: Modern Translation of Martial's Vitam Beatiorem *Epigram*

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The history of Martial in English begins with epigram 10.47, the so-called "Happy Life" poem—thirteen lines "which would become one of the most famous and most frequently translated in the oeuvre" (Sullivan and Boyle 3). English readers can thank Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey, for 10.47's popularity. This "innovative metrician," Vergil translator, and future victim of beheading decided to (like Mallory before him) turn prison time into productivity (3). Around 1540, and likely "during a period of political confinement at Windsor" he cast 10.47 into "felicitous English verse" (3). Surrey titled his sixteen lines (eight couplets) of rhyming iambic tetrameter, "The Meanes to Attain Happy Life," and helped spark the English Renaissance. With the help of Sir Thomas Wyatt, Surrey included this translation in *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557), a volume meant by its editors to introduce Italian metrical techniques into English. From here English learned the sonnet and classical translations began to flourish: Marlowe's *Amores,* Golding's *Metamorphoses*, Chapman's Homer follow. "The *Miscellany* emphasized the Latin classics, but included translations of the Latin epigrams of later writers" (Sullivan and Boyle xxii). Martial had arrived on the English scene, and thanks to Surrey, his timing was impeccable.

In the generations to follow, Martial would attract admiration and translations from many accomplished English poets: Ben Jonson, John Dryden, Addison and Steele, Swift, Pope, Byron, and Ezra Pound. Often his more licentious poems prevented a

wide circulation, but with 1,500 epigrams spread across 12 books, Martial could literally become whatever his translator desired: Martial the moralist, Martial the stoic, Martial the satirist, Martial the misogynist. But despite its translator, and regardless of an era's taste or tact, 10.47 stayed popular. In *Martial: The Unexpected Classic,* Sullivan explains this phenomenon: "This depiction of the happy life has a tempered control that ensures its popularity" (217). He mentions the "surface simplicity of the pregnant language," and a poetry "untainted by the ironic comments [of Horace]" (215). The Watsons agree, cite Sullivan and add, "[10.47] represents M's answer to the familiar philosophical debate on the constituent elements of happiness" (139). They are both right. No matter the time period, its sexual or social mores, Martial 10.47 presents a balanced, approachable version of Epicureanism: avoid pain, advance pleasure. Thus in 10.47 we discover the perfect vehicle for evaluating Martial reception in a given translator. Its popularity challenges the translator to concoct newer, fresher language for what's essentially become a clichéd poem. In this paper, I intend to examine three post-war translations of 10.47: Rolfe Humphries (1963), Peter Porter (1972), and William Matthews (1995). What techniques do they employ to liven up Martial's "most famous and most translated poem" (Sullivan 215)? What level of translator's license do they incorporate in their poems? I will begin with Humphries.

The most noticeable element of Humphries translation is the meter and form, much of which he owes to Surrey. Humphries sets 10.47 in tetrameter and ends his lines on rhyming couplets. The rhythm may not be iambic, but as the first six lines show, the poem sounds slightly antiquated to our modern ears:

> Here are the things, dear friend, which make
> Life not impossible to take:
> Riches bequeathed, not won by toil;
> Fire on the hearth; responsive soil;
> No law suits; seldom formal dress;
> A frank but wise disarmingness;

His diction isn't outdated or overblown; hearth for *focus,* riches for *res,* soil for *aeger.* Even "formal dress" (one imagines a suit and tie) betrays a certain modernizing of Martial's *toga rara*, which was "synonymous with the client's burdensome lifestyle in the city, its absence symbolic of the relaxed life in the country" (Watson and Watson 141). In fact the closer we read Humphries 10.47, the less acutely Roman it sounds. In fact the entire poem has been "de-classified" (excuse the pun) for a 20th century reader. From the three translators cited above, only Humphries avoids naming the poem's addressee. *Iuncundissime Martialis*, most literally translated as "the most agreeable Martial" becomes a far more general "dear friend." Martial could be chatting with anyone, a co-worker at the water cooler, baggers in a supermarket, his neighbor. Furthermore, Humphries translates *non tristis torus et tamen pudicus* (line 10) as "In bed, a wife not frigid nor/ Too reminiscent of a whore" (line 13-14). Again, he attempts to de-Romanize the poem, avoiding the word "chaste," commonly used for *pudicus*. "Chaste" invokes the patriarchal society the Romans openly supported. "Frigid" grounds the poem in a 1960s marriage, an American marriage, commenting on sexual frustrations therein. His word "whore" is almost shocking, an effect that Martial uncharacteristically avoids in 10.47. According to Sullivan and Boyle, this tendency plagues Martial's modern translations:

> In the multitudinous rush to liberate Martial from the shackles of sexual repression, some translators misread the Roman poet…. The so-called 'obscene' poems, to which attention will be seen to be drawn, often possess a more allusive refinement and urbane sexuality, as well as a richer linguistic context (305)

By elaborating *tamen pudicus* into "nor…a whore," Humphries falls into the trap described above. He drops the "w" bomb, for laugh, for rhyme, for the purpose of an un-Roman poem. And yet despite this approach Humphries' translation rings outdated, anti-modern, when read today. Why?

The answer is obvious: the rhyme scheme. Humphries takes 13 hendecasyllabic lines and steamrolls it into 18 lines of rhyming couplets. The need to expand the poem can be excused. Anyone who's ever translated Latin knows the economy of the language, an economy which the poetry accentuates. The rhyme, however, has no precedent in the Latin. Humphries explains: "Most of the time, because the tradition of English verse needs rhyme for wit, especially in the shorter poems, I have rhymed, as Martial did not" (27). The explanation is sensible, but somewhat shortsighted. This "tradition of English verse [which] needs rhyme for wit" includes the 400 year tradition of translating Martial. We return to my initial problem: how to make good ole 10.47 a fresh poem? Humphries' version does little to break the mold, sonically or metrically. Note the end rhyme on his second couplet: soil and toil. Although this cleverly mirrors *aeger* and *labore*, the rhyme's been overused since the 17th century. From an anonymous manuscript

containing "To Julius Martiall" in the British Library: "A good Estate, nott gott with mine owne toyle,/ But by Descent: plac'd in a fruitfull soyle" (Sullivan and Boyle 155). Others have done the same: Goldwyn Smith in 1893, A.E. Street in 1907 (Sullivan and Boyle 268-69, 278). Another overused trick has been to add an additional line to 10.47, a move which makes mathematical sense for couplets (and frequent sonneteers). The majority of translators do this, Thomas Heyrick's "Martial's Happy Life" (1691) being one notable exception. Still, Herrick rhymes *make* and *take* in couplet one, just like Humphries (Sullivan and Boyle 123). What then, is a translator to do? How does one liven up "the Happy Life?" Well, the first objective might be to dispense with the couplets. They're outdated, and although English wit often relies on rhyming couplets, they need not be a straightjacket or necessity, especially for a Martial poem that's less about wit than it is about wisdom. Secondly, 10.47 is no sonnet and should not be treated as such. Humphries does avoid this pitfall, as does Peter Porter.

Peter Porter's 10.47 departs from tradition, and according to Sullivan and Boyle his Martial translations remain "the most successful in this century, their complex allusiveness and energetic counterpoint with the original epigrams (and- frequently- with intervening translations)" (332). It is, at first glance, a long poem: 24 lines, each one hovering at or around ten syllables. Porter's lines enjamb as much as they end-stop. His rhyme scheme certainly defies the couplet tradition, expanding into a detailed pattern of twelve true rhymes. The scheme is this: ABC-ABC, DEF-DEF, GHI-GHI, JKL-JKL. Note his final seven lines:

> (*i*) don't scare yourself with formulae,
> like x

> *j*-equals nought, the schizophrenic quest!
> *k*- What else is there? Well, two points at least—
> *l*- wishing change wastes both time and breath,
> *j*- life's unfair and nothing's for the best,
> *k*- but having started finish off the feast—
> *l*- neither dread your last day, nor long for death (lines 18-24)

The pattern is really quite stunning, both for its intricacy and subtly. We really don't notice the rhymes until the final sextet when the poet interjects, "What else is there? Well, two points at least—" (line 20). Perhaps the "breath/death" rhyme does it, perhaps the end-stops. Maybe since the last six end words can pass as slant rhyme the reader hunkers down in search of pattern. Whatever the case, it's a clever form, and one that rewards a reader's attention. With the aid of rhyme the virtues begin clumping, first into groups of three lines (ABC), then in chunks of six (ABC-ABC). Porter's pattern redefines the epigram.

However, can Porter's 10.47 still fall under the label epigram? He does bloat the poem well past Humphries 18 lines, and nearly doubles the 13 which Martial wrote. Furthermore, his tone strays from Martial's, especially in the final rhyme group. Note the Latin text which spawns the passage above: "*quod sis esse velis nihilque malis;/ summum nec metuas diem nec optes"* (lines 12-13). Watson and Watson write that "the final requirements for a happy life are expressed protreptically as subjunctives, varying the nouns of 3-11" (143). They are didactic lines, instructive lines, spoken to the addressee. They are also concise,

unpretentious, and well-thought. If one aims to moralize through epigram, 10.47's final two lines provide a useful model. Porter, however, takes a different route, adopting a more jocular, self-conscious voice. The interjection at line 20 has no precedent in the Latin text, and represents a "thinking out loud." The poet's voice continues while his mind recharges. Thus Porter abandons Martial's precision and directness, exchanging it for geniality, flippancy, and a little morbidity. Note line 22, where Porter writes "life's unfair and nothing's for the best," a very modern, abysmal sentiment. Again, this line has no precedent in the Latin. It is all Porter. What then, can we make of these additions? Clearly they liven the poem, replacing some of the classical moralizing with a modern, self-conscious monologue. The technique stretches the limits of epigram, but also provides a fresh variation on an old poem.

William Matthews translation of 10.47, however, neither lengthens nor adapts the original Latin. It is the most concise of our modern translations, and yet sonically fresh. Here is the poem in its entirety:

> The things that make life happier,
> Martial, my namesake, are these;
> what we don't earn, but get given;
> unstinting fields, a steady fire;
> no lawsuits, no togas, a restful mind;
> a healthy body not racked by long work;
> truth, tact, and democratic friends;
> good simple food, clear-hearted guests;
> nights carefree but not drenched by wine;
> a bed not guilty nor a prude's
> and sleep that snips short the long dark:
> let us wish to be none but who we are
> and neither dread the end nor lean to it.

Matthews does not exceed the length of Martial's Latin, maintaining the epigram's visual autonomy and epigram size. His images also retain their Roman-ness (he uses both "Martial," and "togas"), doing little to modernize or hide the poem's age. This is Martial fluidly transferred into modern American English. And yet, Matthews achieves this through a very close, very precise reading of the Latin. His lines are tight, avoiding the interjections of Porter or the couplets of Humphries. In fact, when one stands the Latin text alongside the English (as Matthews does on the pages of *The Mortal City*) one doesn't just see a Latin line directly across from the English equivalent, but two poems that mirror their syntax. Even some of the punctuation matches. Notice Martial's opening, with Matthews interspersed: "*Vitam quae faciant beatiorem* (The things that make life happier) *iuncundissime Martialis* (Martial, my namesake) *haec sunt* (are these)." The English doubles the Latin. Matthews continues this throughout the list of pleasantries, forfeiting little, gaining much. His poem cannot have a narrator anymore self-aware, anymore flippant than Martial himself. He must also stick to the poem's catalogue nature. Matthews achieves this through carefully chosen words, minimal conjunctions, articles, or extraneous verbiage. His English takes its lead from Latin's economy, a tactic which forces Matthews to concoct fresh, artful phrases for Martial's images. Note his "unstinting fields" for *non ingratus aeger* (line 4). The Latin takes six syllables, the English four, and yet the connotations match. Partially, this is due to Martial double negative (*non ingratus*) which we would naturally drop from the English, but one should also credit Matthews' ingenuity. He coins a new phrase, an unforeseen approach to line 4. There are also lines 10-11, whose Latin reads, "*non tristis torus et tamen*

pudicus/ somnus qui faciat breves tenebras." Matthews avoids any shock words, delivering "a bed not guilty nor a prude's" (line 10). This tone and diction remains faithful to Martial's unusual moderation in 10.47 He follows this with "and sleep that snips short the long dark," something of an improvement on the Martial. The sibilants in the line's first half speed the reading up ("sleep that snips short"), only to slowdown on "long dark," two words whose sense and spoken sound slow the mouth. In this way Matthews *adds* the advantages of a sonically interesting English phrase to the brevity of the Latin. Overall, his poem maintains Martial's intent, tone, and form, while utilizing the sounds of the English language accessible to the reader. It is a fresh, modern rendering.

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